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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHMMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHMMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHFJSCC/COMMARFORPAC
RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 007286

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SUBJECT: CHASING "UNDERCURRENTS" IN NORTHEASTERN THAILAND

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 00211 (UNDERCURRENTS CONFIDENCE BOTH

- WEAK IN NORTH)
- ¶B. BANGKOK 07150 (EXPLAINING THE DECISION TO LIFT MARTIAL LAW)
 - ¶C. BANGKOK 07132 (THAI CABINET APPROVES PARTIAL LIFTING OF MARTIAL LAW)
 - ¶D. BANGKOK 006085 (COUP REACTION IN THAKSIN-COUNTRY)

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR SUSAN M. SUTTON. REASON 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Despite the interim government's decision to extend martial law in some provinces (refs A-C), our contacts in three Northeastern provinces--the heart of Thaksin country--are nearly unanimous in their denial that any political "undercurrents" are active in that region. During a visit by Poloff in late November, over a dozen politicians, local officials, NGO representatives and academics painted a nearly uniform picture of a crushingly poor rural population focused on day-to-day survival rather than the political navel-gazing in Bangkok. Thaksin's former subordinates, moreover, are either overseas, or already focused on party-switching ahead of the next election. More surprising, our contacts cited widespread uncertainty over the interim government's effectiveness and attention to issues that matter to local voters. As one aged farmer and NGO leader told us, "there are no undercurrents (stirred up by outsiders), but if the government doesn't pay attention (to agricultural issues), in another two to three months you could have an uprising." End Summary.

THAKSIN'S HEART OF DARKNESS

¶2. (C) Poloff and Polfsn traveled to the rural northeastern (aka Isaan) provinces of Si Sa Ket, Surin and Buriram November 29 to December 1. These three provinces bordering Cambodia are among the very poorest in Thailand, with at least seventy percent of the population living in poverty. Most people depend on agriculture--almost always rice cultivation--to earn a living. The people of these provinces also overwhelmingly voted for Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party in all three of its election victories since 2001, giving rise to the interim government's fear that this region remains a potential hotbed of political opposition. One of

Thaksin's more notorious lieutenants, Newin Chidchob, is from Buriram, and has heavy influence in neighboring Surin, adding to these security concerns.

¶ 13. (SBU) In their decision to extend martial law in these provinces last week, interim government officials continued to cite reports of political "undercurrents"--alleged efforts by Thaksin supporters to organize rural opposition to the junta--as justification. Local media have reported the discovery of flyers attacking the interim government--and coup leaders--in this region as further evidence of an anti-government mindset.

LIKE CRICKETS (THOSE UNEATEN) CHIRPING

¶ 14. (C) During the often lengthy driving journey within and between these provinces, Poloff witnessed no army or police checkpoints, and rarely even saw any police conducting "normal" activities. In contrast to a separate visit by Poloffs to relatively developed Khon Kaen in October (ref D), no security officials monitored our meetings or travels.

¶ 15. (C) Our local contacts--including central government officials, academics, local lawyers, politicians and NGO leaders--were nearly uniform in their denial of any "undercurrents" in any of the three provinces. All described the situation in their provinces as "quiet." Only one Commerce Ministry official in Surin believed that "undercurrents" existed in his area, but cited no proof, just rumors. Most were surprised that martial law had been extended in the area. Almost all cited the same reasons for the lack of political opposition to the government: local people are focused on putting food on the table, not

BANGKOK 00007286 002 OF 004

politics. According to Amnart Somsri, Chairman of the Law Society of Thailand, Si Sa Ket branch, martial law has no impact on the local people, only on the politicians. "No one is interested in going to Bangkok and stirring up trouble." Lots of people don't even understand what is going on politically. The politicians in Bangkok "are just playing their games."

¶ 16. (C) According to Prayong Siriprasertsilp, Chief of the Provincial Administration Office in Surin, many people appreciated the Thaksin government's agricultural programs, but very few people feel strongly about the coup. Arunsak Ocharos, Secretary General of the Si Sa Ket People's Organization Council and a longtime schoolteacher in the area, pointed to rural people's lack of both political education and access to mass media. The farmers "close their ears and eyes" when politics comes up, even on television. Dr. Chaiya Chotikawanit, Vice Rector of Rajabhat Buriram University, agreed with the low level of political sophistication among local people. According to Dr. Chaiya, Buriram remains very quiet, and former Thaksin ally (and local political boss) Newin Chidchob remains in India. Dr. Chaiya believes that the interim government kept martial law in place because they are scared that pro-Thaksin figures could instigate the people into protesting, but this is not happening. Such rural organization requires money and leadership, both of which are non-existent. Ministry of Interior officials in both Si Sa Ket and Surin denied having been consulted by Bangkok officials on the martial law decision. As one put it, "that's the Army's responsibility."

¶ 17. (C) Some of our contacts pointed to the respected standing of Interim PM Surayud and the King's official acquiescence to the coup as key factors in the rural public's acceptance. Poolsombat Namlar, Director of the Isaan Community NGO, said that rural people are sad that Thaksin is gone, but believe that the government has more moral authority now, based on former Army Commander and Privy Councillor Surayud's "status" in Thai society. Dr. Chaiya simply said, "the people stand with and depend on the King. That's all that matters." In a

separate meeting, Sarai Kiewthaisong an academic who is the Chairwoman of the Village Fund and Loan Networks of Ron Tong District, Amphoe Satuk, Buriram, repeated this almost verbatim, saying, "people are sad about the coup but...everyone here still stands with the King."

18. (C) The only group that offered strong opinions on the coup were, as expected, the three former TRT Members of Parliament (MPs) we separately spoke with. All three--Wiwatchai Hotaraweisaya (Si Sa Ket), Manit Sangphum (Surin) and Sophon Phetsawang (Buriram)--decried the Army's ouster of an elected government and pointed to the interim government's failure to prove their allegations of widespread graft in the Thaksin government. Wiwatchai believes that the coup will "backfire" and result in further delays to a new election, as the public becomes more openly opposed to the junta. "Before, the privy councilors served as the referees in Thai politics and kept the game relatively fair, but now, they have put on uniforms and are playing on the field. Who will ensure the game is fair now?" Sophon, a former deputy house speaker who has represented his district in parliament seven times (for several different political parties), compared the current government to the military juntas of the 1970s, and predicted even odds that the junta will launch a coup against itself (as has happened before) to delay the next election.

19. (C) All three former MPs denied the existence of any undercurrents in their provinces, and explained that they were keeping a low profile so as not to arouse the scrutiny of the security forces. Wiwatchai explained that, immediately after the coup, he had been directed by TRT leaders in Bangkok to keep quiet and refrain from political activities. He added that this was the last communication he received from his party leadership, several months ago. Both Manit and Sophon, however, have resigned from TRT and are actively maneuvering for spots in a different (or new) political party for the next election (septel will elaborate

BANGKOK 00007286 003 OF 004

on these efforts.)

LOCALS QUESTION INTERIM GOV'S INTENTIONS

110. (C) Critics of the Thaksin government often pointed to the raft of populist programs--the 30 baht health care scheme, the Village Fund, etc--as naked attempts to buy rural votes. Indeed, we expected to hear a much stronger current of disappointment among locals that these policies may be in jeopardy (septel will report further on the status of these programs). Instead, our contacts focused on questioning the effectiveness of the new, interim government. Whether merely perception or reality, several contacts pointed at the slow central government response to recent flooding and a lack of attention to agricultural issues as evidence of the interim government's failure to meet the expectations (heightened under Thaksin) of rural voters. (Note: in referring to the interim government, our contacts almost invariably used the initials for the Council on National Security (CNS) rather than refer to the civilian government, an interesting symbol of a wide-spread perception that the military is still really in charge. End Note.)

111. (C) Sorasath Kietsuranond, a member of the Si Sa Ket Chamber of Commerce, was blunt in expressing little confidence in the central government. "We don't know what they intend to do. Even after several months it is still not clear what their policies are; people liked Thaksin's policies." According to Sorasath, politics are not as important as economics. "If the government can't get this right, they can't get anything right."

112. (C) When asked if the government was getting its "message out," Dr. Chaiya replied in the negative. According to him, the interim government has little political influence at the

local level and is doing a poor job of communicating with the rural people. NGO leader Poolsombat echoed this comments, saying that the government is still trying to explain their actions and policies, which are not clear at all.

¶13. (C) Academic and Village Fund Chairwoman Sarai let loose with one of the more passionate diatribes against the current government. Sarai, who grew up in a relatively impoverished village in Buriram, where her father Somsri Thonglor is a widely respected farmer and anti-poverty leader, said, "life here for most people is very difficult, but this new government is even more difficult!" According to Sarai, the people are very confused. They do not understand the coup, the new government and the King's "sufficiency economy" theory. The people don't know anything about national level politics--they don't read newspapers. Most damning of all, the government has not contacted local level leaders--who are the bedrock of Isaan politics. In Sarai's view, the government doesn't appear to have a clear agricultural plan or strategy. Without rural representation in Bangkok, the government is losing legitimacy day by day.

¶14. (C) Sarai's wrinkled and soft-spoken father Somsri echoed these concerns. While professing no special support for the Thaksin government, Somsri--who represents nearly 14,000 farmers in rural Buriram--expressed disappointment with the Surayud administration's lackluster efforts to reach out to the rural people. During Surayud's much publicized visit to Buriram after the coup, the interim PM failed to meet with local, elected political leaders from the district and village level. Even worse, the PM didn't even venture beyond the Buriram airport on his visit. While not denying that certain Thaksin-era policies were very popular in Buriram, Somsri said that it was a perception of inattention, more than anything, that was eroding local faith in the interim government. According to Somsri, "there are no undercurrents (stirred up by outsiders), but if the government doesn't pay attention (to agricultural issues), in another two to three months you could have an uprising."

COMMENT

BANGKOK 00007286 004 OF 004

¶15. (C) The lack of active undercurrents in this part of Isaan was not surprising, but we expected a stronger sense of lingering support for Thaksin and his policies (Note: our contacts did agree that, if he ran again, the former PM would win in a landslide. End Note.) The breadth and depth of rural dissatisfaction with the current government was much stronger than we anticipated and based less on unhappiness with the coup rather than dissatisfaction with current performance. Somsri's warning of a possible "uprising" based on government inattention to agricultural and poverty issues is probably hyperbole--as another contact put it, the elite in Bangkok have been ignoring the rural poor since the dawn of constitutional politics in the 1930s. However, for all the interim government's talk of working for the good of the people, the divide between the political reality in Bangkok and the real life of average Thai voters in the countryside remains as wide as ever.

BOYCE